



Week 4 - More Models of Atonement

Week 4, Day 1 - Christus Victor

Colossians 2:13-15

13 And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, 14 erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. 15 He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

1 John 3:8

8 Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil.

Understanding the Passage:

Do you have a favorite "unexpected win" story? Maybe it's the Miracle on Ice from the 1980 Winter Olympics, or Rocky, or when Moonlight won Best Picture after La La Land was announced. Those moments when everything seems lost, but victory breaks through anyway.

That's a great way to understand the Christus Victor model of atonement. At first glance, the cross looks like defeat-pain, death, humiliation. But in the early Church, Christians saw the cross as the moment of victory. This wasn't wishful thinking or denial of suffering; it was a radical reinterpretation of what power actually is.

This model was popularized by Gustaf Aulén in 1930, though he showed that early Church Fathers like Irenaeus and Athanasius already believed it. Aulén used a vivid image-the "fishhook": God puts Jesus on the hook as bait, and Satan takes the bait. In trying to destroy Jesus, evil ends up destroying itself. It's a strange image, maybe even troubling at first. But consider what it reveals: the powers of darkness thought they could win by killing the author of life. They didn't understand that death itself would be swallowed up in that moment.

What does this say about the kind of power God uses to win? Not coercive power, not violence, but self-giving love. The cross unmask the powers of sin and death-showing that their apparent

strength is actually weakness compared to the love of God. This changes everything about how we're called to live as disciples.

Think about the areas of your life where you feel like you're losing. Maybe it's a struggle with sin that keeps defeating you. Maybe it's a relationship that feels beyond repair. Maybe it's a cultural moment where it seems like darkness is winning. The Christus Victor model doesn't minimize those struggles-but it does reframe them. The decisive battle has already been won. You're not fighting for victory; you're fighting from victory.

Colossians 2:15 makes it clear: Christ "disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in the cross." This isn't hidden or subtle-it's a public victory march. In the ancient world, victorious generals would parade through the streets with their defeated enemies on display. Paul uses that imagery here: Jesus has already paraded the powers of evil through the streets in chains.

But here's where discipleship gets practical. If Christ has won through self-giving love rather than domination, then we're called to the same kind of power. When someone wrongs you, the impulse is to retaliate, to dominate, to win. But Jesus shows us a different way-a way that looks like losing but is actually victorious. Loving your enemy isn't naive weakness; it's participating in the same power that defeated death itself.

Some people ask: "If Christ has already won, why does the world still feel so broken?" That's the tension between the victory won and the victory yet to come-what theologians call "already and not yet." The decisive battle has been won on the cross, but the cleanup is still underway. We live in the time between Christ's triumph and its full realization. D-Day has happened; V-E Day is coming.

This means your daily choices matter. You're not trying to earn a victory that hasn't happened yet. You're living into a victory that's already secured. When you choose forgiveness over revenge, when you choose generosity over selfishness, when you choose truth over comfortable lies-you're not hoping that love might win someday. You're acting on the reality that love has already won. You're living as a citizen of the new creation that Christ's victory inaugurated.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Where in your life do you need to remember that Christ has already won the decisive battle?
2. How does seeing God's power as self-giving love rather than coercive force change your understanding of victory?

Week 4, Day 2 - Ransom Theory

Mark 10:45

45 For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.

1 Timothy 2:5-6

5 For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, 6 who gave himself a ransom for all-this was attested at the right time.

1 Peter 1:18-19

18 You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.

Understanding the Passage:

The Christus Victor model is actually a reworking of an older idea-the Ransom Theory. What's a ransom? It's the price paid to set captives free. And that word matters, because it names a reality we often try to avoid: we were captive.

The New Testament literally uses this word. Jesus says in Mark 10:45, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." In the early Church, this was understood as humanity being enslaved to sin and death-and Jesus paying the price to set us free. This wasn't metaphorical language. They believed humanity was genuinely trapped, unable to escape on our own strength.

But what is Jesus paying for? Early church fathers sometimes got tangled up in the mechanics-does God pay Satan? Is there some cosmic transaction? Aulén critiqued these overly transactional versions of the model. He argued that focusing on who gets paid misses the point. What matters is the heart of the model: Christ rescues us at infinite cost to himself.

The ransom is not business; it's liberation. It's God breaking the chains of everything that holds creation captive. We were enslaved not just to our personal sins, but to futile ways of living, to powers beyond ourselves, to death itself. Think about the patterns in your life that you can't seem to break. The resentment you keep returning to. The anxiety that grips you every morning. The habits that promise satisfaction but leave you emptier. These aren't just bad choices-they're chains.

Peter makes the cost crystal clear: "You were ransomed...not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ." The price wasn't money. It was the life of God's own Son. When you're tempted to think your freedom was cheap, remember what it cost. When you're tempted to return to the chains you've been freed from, remember the price that was paid.

This is why 1 Timothy 2:5-6 calls Jesus the "one mediator between God and humankind"-he stands in the gap, pays what we could not pay, and sets us free. But here's the discipleship question: what are you doing with your freedom?

Paul says in Galatians 5:1, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." The ransom has been paid. The chains are broken. But freedom is something you have to actually live into. It's possible to be legally free but still live like a slave, still thinking like a captive, still acting like you're bound.

What does it look like to live as a ransomed person? It means you don't have to prove your worth-the price has already been paid. It means you don't have to earn your freedom-it's been bought for you. It means when the old patterns come calling, you can say, "I don't belong to you anymore. A ransom has been paid." Your daily practice of discipleship is learning to live in the freedom you've already been given, rather than returning to the prison you've already left.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What "futile ways" do you need to be ransomed from today?
2. How does understanding Jesus' death as the price for your liberation change the way you view your freedom in Christ?

Week 4, Day 3 - Scapegoat Model

Leviticus 16:20-22

20 When he has finished atoning for the holy place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall present the live goat. 21 Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. 22 The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region, and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.

John 1:29

29 The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

Isaiah 53:6

6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Understanding the Passage:

The image of the scapegoat comes from the Old Testament sacrificial system-especially Leviticus 16 and the Day of Atonement. Once a year, the high priest would symbolically place the sins of the people on a goat and send it out into the wilderness, carrying their sins away. The goat bore what the people could not bear. It carried away what they could not carry.

But French philosopher René Girard saw something deeper in this ritual. He argued that human societies have always maintained order through scapegoating-blaming someone else for their violence or chaos. We pick a victim, heap our collective guilt on them, and feel cleansed when they're removed. The mechanism works because everyone agrees that this person is the problem. Once they're gone, we can pretend our hands are clean.

Think about how this plays out in your own life. When a project fails at work, who gets blamed? When a family gathering goes sideways, whose fault is it? When your church experiences conflict, who becomes the lightning rod? We're always looking for someone to carry what we don't want to own. It's easier to point at someone else's failure than to acknowledge our own contribution to the mess.

How does this change how we see the cross? Instead of God demanding a victim, the cross shows that we are the ones who demand victims-and that God steps into that system to break it forever. Jesus becomes the innocent victim who exposes and ends the cycle. He doesn't just participate in the scapegoat mechanism; he reveals it for what it is and exhausts its power.

When John the Baptist sees Jesus, he declares: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" Jesus is the ultimate scapegoat, bearing our sin not because God needs a victim, but because God is willing to become the victim to stop our cycle of violence and blame. He takes the place of the accused, and in doing so, exposes the accusers.

Some theologians, particularly womanist scholars, have raised important concerns about ideas of surrogacy. Marginalized communities have historically been used as "scapegoats"-forced to bear the pain, struggle, and difficulty of others, even to the point of enslaved women bearing children for their enslavers. Does calling Jesus a surrogate for our sin reinforce that oppression? Does it suggest that God endorses forcing the innocent to suffer for the guilty?

There's a crucial distinction: Jesus is a willing surrogate. He chose the cross. He wasn't forced. John 10:18 records Jesus saying, "No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord." His choice breaks the cycle rather than perpetuating it. Unlike human scapegoating, which victimizes the powerless, Jesus—who has all power—chooses to take our place to set us free. The victim becomes the victor precisely because he chose to enter the system from the inside and destroy it.

But here's where it gets personal for your discipleship: if Jesus exposes and ends the scapegoating mechanism, then followers of Jesus cannot participate in it. You cannot follow the scapegoat while making others into scapegoats. When conflict arises, you're called to resist the impulse to find someone to blame. When your community needs healing, you're called to own your part rather than pointing fingers. When the culture wars rage, you're called to refuse the game of making the other side carry all that's wrong with the world.

This is costly discipleship. It's much easier to participate in collective blame than to stand against it. But Jesus calls you to a different way—the way of the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world, not by redistributing blame, but by absorbing it and breaking its power forever.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Where in your life are you tempted to find a scapegoat—someone to blame for what's wrong?
2. How does Jesus' willing choice to bear our sin differ from the ways we might force others to carry burdens that aren't theirs?
3. What does it mean that Jesus "takes away the sin of the world" rather than just covering it up or ignoring it?

Week 4, Day 4 - Incarnational Atonement

John 1:14

14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Philippians 2:6-8

6 who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human, 8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Hebrews 2:14-15

14 Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.

Understanding the Passage:

Most of the Gospels aren't actually focused on the cross—they're focused on Jesus' life. His teachings, his miracles, his meals with sinners, his compassion for the outcast. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John could have written much shorter books if the only thing that mattered was Good Friday and Easter Sunday. But they didn't. They gave us Jesus' full life. So we have to ask: are those parts atoning too?

Yes. The Incarnation itself—God taking on flesh—is redemptive. The early church fathers had a saying: "What is not assumed is not healed." Gregory of Nazianzus argued that if Christ didn't take on full humanity, then full humanity couldn't be redeemed. In becoming human, Christ redeems every stage of human life—birth, growth, work, suffering, even death. Nothing is left untouched.

Think about a tombstone. There's a birth date, a dash, and a death date. That dash represents the whole life lived between. Jesus has that dash too-a whole human life between his miraculous birth and his death and resurrection. And that dash matters.

Most of the Gospel accounts aren't the Passion narrative. They're Jesus teaching the Sermon on the Mount, healing the sick, weeping at Lazarus' tomb, eating with tax collectors, praying in the garden, laughing with children, getting angry at religious hypocrisy, experiencing hunger and thirst and exhaustion. What's "saving" about that dash in Jesus' life?

When "the Word became flesh and lived among us," God entered into the full human experience. By assuming our humanity, Jesus sanctifies it. He shows us what it looks like to be fully human-to live in complete dependence on the Father, to love without reservation, to face temptation without sin. Every ordinary moment of Jesus' life is a moment of God redeeming what it means to be human.

This changes how you think about your own ordinary moments. When you're tired and frustrated with your kids, remember that Jesus experienced exhaustion and frustration too-and remained faithful. When you're facing temptation to cut corners or compromise, remember that Jesus "has been tested as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). When you're grieving, remember that Jesus wept. Your daily life-the mundane, the ordinary, the struggle-is the very stuff that Jesus took on in the Incarnation.

Hebrews tells us that Jesus "shared the same things" we share-flesh and blood, limitation, temptation, suffering. He didn't just visit humanity like a tourist; he became human. He didn't skip the hard parts. He experienced the full weight of what it means to be a creature, to be dependent, vulnerable, mortal. And in doing so, he destroyed the power of death and freed those held captive by fear.

The cross is essential, but it's not isolated from the rest of Jesus' life. His birth, his teaching, his compassion, his obedience-all of it matters. All of it is part of how God saves us. This means your discipleship isn't just about getting to heaven when you die. It's about learning to live like Jesus lived-fully human, fully dependent on God, fully engaged with the world.

When you share a meal with someone, you're imitating Jesus who ate with sinners. When you show compassion to the outcast, you're following Jesus who touched lepers. When you pray in the midst of anguish, you're walking in the footsteps of Jesus in Gethsemane. The incarnational model says that all of life-not just the spiritual moments, not just the big decisions, but the daily, ordinary, human moments, is the arena where discipleship happens. Because Jesus didn't just redeem you from death. He redeemed your life.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What does it mean to you that Jesus sanctified all of human life, not just human death?
2. How does Jesus' full humanity-his experience of limitation, temptation, and suffering-give you hope in your own struggles?
3. What parts of Jesus' life (outside of the cross) are most meaningful to you? Why?

Week 4, Day 5 - Bringing It All Together

Ephesians 3:14-19

14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. 16 I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit 17 and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. 18 I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Understanding the Passage:

Over these two weeks, we've looked at multiple models of atonement: Substitutionary, Satisfaction, Moral Exemplar, Healing, Recapitulation, Christus Victor, Ransom, Scapegoat, and Incarnational. Nine different ways of trying to express the same mystery. Nine different windows into what God has done through Christ.

So which one is right? This is where we often want to land, picking the winner, declaring one model correct and the others incomplete or wrong. But that impulse misses something important.

All of them-and none of them completely. Each model highlights a different facet of the same diamond. Each one gives us language to express part of the mystery of what God has done through Christ. The substitutionary model reminds us that Christ took our place. The satisfaction model shows us that sin is serious and costs something. The moral exemplar model calls us to follow Jesus' example. The healing model treats us as patients, not just criminals. The recapitulation model tells us Jesus rewrites our story from the beginning.

The Christus Victor model proclaims that Christ has won the decisive battle. The ransom model declares that we've been set free at infinite cost. The scapegoat model exposes and ends our cycle of blaming others. And the incarnational model shows us that Jesus' entire life-not just his death-is redemptive.

Each theory helps us see part of the picture, but the full picture is a Person. Atonement isn't a formula to solve; it's a love to receive. This matters for your discipleship because it shapes how you respond when you encounter Christians who emphasize different models than you do.

Maybe you grew up in a church that focused almost exclusively on substitutionary atonement-Jesus died in your place to satisfy God's wrath. And maybe you've met Christians who talk mostly about Jesus as moral exemplar-showing us how to live. Instead of arguing about which is right, what if both are true? What if you need both-the assurance that Christ has done for you what you could never do, and the call to follow his example in how you live?

Or maybe you're drawn to the healing model because you've experienced Jesus' presence in your brokenness, but you've struggled with the satisfaction model because it feels transactional. What if both are describing the same reality from different angles? God takes sin seriously enough to bear its full cost (satisfaction), and God loves you personally enough to heal your deepest wounds (healing).

Paul's prayer in Ephesians captures this beautifully. He prays that we would "comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth" of Christ's love-"and to know this love that surpasses knowledge." Did you catch that? We're called to know a love that surpasses knowledge.

The models help us understand, but understanding isn't the goal. Being filled with the fullness of God is the goal. Being rooted and grounded in love is the goal. You can master every atonement theory and still miss the point if you haven't encountered the Person those theories are trying to describe.

We've spent two weeks exploring the rich, complex, and beautiful mystery of our salvation. But all of these theories are simply windows into the same reality: the love of God revealed in Christ. Your daily practice of discipleship is learning to live in that love-not just understanding it intellectually, but experiencing it personally, allowing it to reshape how you see yourself, how you see others, how you see the world.

When you fail, remember substitution-Christ has taken your place. When you're stuck in sin, remember ransom-you've been set free. When you're tempted to give up, remember Christus Victor-the battle is already won. When you're broken, remember healing-Jesus is the Great Physician. When you're trying to figure out how to live, remember moral exemplar-follow Jesus' steps. When you need hope that your story can be different, remember recapitulation-Jesus is rewriting the human story from the beginning. When you're tempted to scapegoat others, remember Jesus bore our blame to end that cycle. When you wonder if God cares about the mundane details of your life, remember incarnation-Jesus lived a full human life and sanctified every moment of it.

You don't have to pick just one. You get them all. Because you don't just get theories about atonement. You get Christ.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Which model of atonement speaks most powerfully to you right now? Why?
2. How does holding multiple models together (rather than choosing just one) enrich your understanding of salvation?
3. What would it look like for you to move from understanding theories about atonement to experiencing the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge?

Video Discussion Questions:

1. Before this week's study, had you heard of the Christus Victor model? How does seeing the cross as a victory change your perspective?
2. The ransom theory emphasizes that Jesus paid a price to set us free. What does freedom in Christ look like in your daily life?
3. How do you respond to the concern that scapegoat theology might reinforce oppression? What's the difference between Jesus as a willing surrogate and forced surrogacy?
4. The incarnational model says that Jesus' entire life-not just his death-is redemptive. How does that change the way you read the Gospels?
5. Of all the atonement models we've studied (nine total across weeks 3-5), which one do you find yourself most drawn to? Why?
6. How might holding multiple models of atonement together help us in conversations with other Christians who emphasize different aspects of salvation?
7. Paul prays that we would know "the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge." How do you balance studying theology with simply receiving God's love?
8. What is your biggest takeaway from these two weeks of studying atonement?

Prayer requests and other notes: